

## *Golf, a short and a long game*

### *What has been said*

The first allusion of a game called golf is the well-known act of the Scottish parliament from 1457 in which such a game was prohibited. It has always been taken for granted that it was this game from which golf as we know it today has evolved.

Of late several historians have come to the conclusion that this game played in town was not golf as we know it today, but a game so different from the real golf game as played on links land. One could consider these two games with the same name incommensurable club and ball games ('GOLF – Scotland's Game', David Hamilton, 1998). Other historians are even of the opinion that the game in town was a kind of hockey (Heiner Gillmeister, 'De naakte waarheid over golf' (The naked truth about golf], article in 'Sportimonium' 23, 2003).

The discussion about long and short games in Scotland concentrates on two social groups: the commoners and the middle class.

It is said that that during the first centuries of the existence of a game called 'golf', the humble people played a game in the streets and in the churchyards of the Scottish towns. In the towns not much space was available for a long hitting game and it was restricted to a short club and ball game to overcome the danger of hitting other people and to avoid damaging windows of houses and churches.



A so-called ‘new testament’ was revealed some years ago in which is stated that the ancient Scottish town golf game, whatever it was, was very similar to the games of colf, crosse and mail played in the towns on the continent. It is said that this stick and ball game was played on Sundays by common people who came from all over the countryside to the towns to go to church and to play afterwards in the churchyard and on village greens all kinds of games of which one was the ancient short golf game. It is said that these golfers used very crude clubs and balls and had their own unwritten rules.

### *What could have been*

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries the degree of urbanisation in Scotland was very low, meaning that the great majority of ordinary Scots, the lower class, lived in or near small villages in the countryside as farmers, fishermen, weavers, journeymen, serfs, etc.

These villages consisted of just one or two streets ending up in the countryside; sometimes the village had a small church and probably a tavern for a few hundred inhabitants, including the surrounding hamlets.

As a consequence of the low rate of urbanisation, there were only a few towns. These towns were rather small with just some streets, a school and two or three churches and some taverns. Only a few of these towns had a wall, a ditch or simple ramparts to protect the few houses. The majority of the inhabitants, hardly more than a few thousand, belonged to the upper middle class (learned people) and lower middle class.

The upper class, the royalty and the aristocrats, just a few hundred, lived in their castles on large estates.

Assuming that the humble people from the villages played a golf-like game, they certainly did not have a ‘space’ problem. They had more than enough space available to play a long game, starting from the village street into the boundless fields and returning into the village street. They certainly made their own clubs and balls. They most probably used trees or other recognisable obstacles in the field as a target. They played according to unwritten rules handed down from father to son.

There is no reason to believe that on Sundays the working class in the vicinity of the village walked ‘for miles’ to the ‘faraway town’ to go to church and to play golf afterwards. If these people, who worked at least six days a week for many hours, took some time off on Sunday, they probably stayed at or near their home.

*In 1460, three years after the ordinance against playing golf and football, Edinburgh was just a small town, hardly more than one street from the castle towards Holyrood Palace at the other side. Was golf played on that road or in the surrounding fields or on the links near Leith? – [www.constructionshows.com](http://www.constructionshows.com)*



On special days such as All Saints' Day, Christmas, Easter and patron saints days they went to the village to dance, to talk, to eat, to sing, to go to church and to play some games of which golf could have been one. Villagers and farmers hardly ever came to the larger towns.

(Interview 2012 with Serge Vendeme, local French historian)

When the Reformation took over from the Catholic religion daily life changed dramatically and had severe consequences for playing in general and golf in particular.

In the few, rather small towns there were generally two kinds of social classes represented. The smallest group was the ('upper'?) middle class, the learned people. The other, much larger group was the lower middle class consisting of craftsmen, shopkeepers, merchants, lower-level civil servants and clergymen. It is a known fact that on the British Isles there was a clear division between the various social classes.

When golf was played in town, one could wonder who did so: the 'uppies' or the 'downies'? It is questionable that these two classes would play the same game together.



A 17<sup>th</sup> century map of Scotland with Glasgow in the middle when the town consisted of a couple of streets. Around the town there was ample space. Would golf players remain in the few built-up streets or would they have gone from the streets into the open fields to play a rather long golf game? – *‘Theatrum orbis terrarum sive Atlas novus Volume V’*, Joan Blaeu, 1654; reprint 2006 – Bibliothèque de Genève, Switzerland

Map of Aberdeen from 1693. At that time most towns in Scotland were so small that we can hardly believe that the addicted golf players played their game only in those one or two streets, instead of going into the wide-open space around the rather small town. – John Slezer, *‘Theatrum Scotiae’*, 1693 – Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München, Germany



Not based on research results, we assume that the lower middle class could have played golf in the town. But what about the upper middle class, what kind of golf did they play and where did they play it. Did they go to the sea-side links? If the learned people played golf in town, where did the other group play what kind of game? Could it have been the long hand-tennis game, football or perhaps the ancient game of hockey?

Most explanations of golf in town refer to the very restricted space in town for a game like golf. People, and so golfers, were cramped in the churchyards, streets and the few open spaces in the towns, surrounded by the town walls and ramparts. They were a nuisance to others and they damaged windows of houses and churches.

Looking at the old maps of Scottish towns, one sees only a few streets and lots of open spaces. Most towns had hardly any walls or ramparts to defend the towns and players could find space galore to hit golf balls as far as they could. In our opinion, there is no reason to believe that the Scottish townsmen played a short golf game. This opinion is supported by the fact that in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries no ordinances were issued to ban this ‘dangerous and harmful game’ from the streets.

The oldest Masonic Lodge was founded in 1598. In several golf history publications we can read about groups of freemasons who played golf together, being a sort of appetizer for copious meals sprinkled with jugs of wine. They often behaved as societies with specific rules about clothing, attendance, etc. Could these masons have been the upper middle class who played golf on parkland or the sea-side links?

Furthermore there are unsolved questions about the participation of aristocracy in the game of golf. Who were these aristocrats? With whom did they play? Where did they play? In the thousands of pages on the ancient history of golf no real answers have been given to these questions. Did the counts, the barons, the lords and other aristocrats play golf between common people on common land such as the sea-side links? These links were used for grazing cattle, burying animals, raising rabbits, fishing, military exercises, meeting people, organising fairs, horse racing and playing games such as football, shinty and the long game of hand-tennis. Is it realistic to believe that the nobles played golf on these overcrowded links? It could well be that if the aristocrats played golf, they did so on their own estates as they did with the short game of hand-tennis.

And what about the king himself?



*Can one imagine Scottish kings and aristocrats playing a game of golf on the seaside links hitting expensive balls into the crowds seeking diversion? But then, where did they play? – 'Life at the seaside', William Powell Frith, 1854 – Photo credit © Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth, United Kingdom*